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Key Pedagogic Thinkers: Jean Baudrillard

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Jean Baudrillard was born in Reims, France, in 1929, and completed his undergraduate work at the Sorbonne, taking a degree in German. Upon graduation, he taught high school. In the early 1960s, he began graduate studies at the University of Paris, Nanterre, earning his doctorate in sociology in 1966.

Baudrillard published 30 books in which he examined various facets of modern society: gender, race, consumerism, politics, the media, and so forth. His focus was semiological—how objects and signs reflect the current human condition. Although Baudrillard did not write about education, his work is nevertheless relevant if we recognize that our educational system is a reflection of society. A Baudrillardian perspective raises the following question: *What effect has consumerism had on education?* To address this question, we offer some background information related to Baudrillard's philosophical inquiries. This is followed by our brief analysis of how Baudrillard's work may provide some potential answers to the above question and of how it can help us interpret the changes that have occurred in education during the modern period. We give special emphasis to *The Consumer Society* and *Simulacra and Simulation*.

Rejecting the Marxist emphasis on production in *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard examined the roles of consumerism and consumption in advanced capitalism, arguing that the sheer abundance of consumer goods has diminished their use-value and elevated their sign-value.[1] On its face, the argument may seem counterintuitive. The abundance of consumer goods in modern society suggests greater use-value, not less: ostensibly, people buy goods for their utility. For Baudrillard, however, what diminishes use-value and heightens sign-value is the individual need for recognition that the abundance of goods cannot satisfy. The causal factor is not the actuality of abundance but rather the growing need for social differentiation as anonymity becomes the norm in an over-populated world.

Baudrillard, like Thorstein Veblen before him, argued that the sign-value of goods is now a measure of one's status in our increasingly undifferentiated society. Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1994) was arguably the first major work to introduce the concept of conspicuous consumption in the developed world as a measure of social status, and Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934/2005) identified one of the more extreme forms, which existed among the Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific Northwest. A tribe member

[1] One could argue that this still falls within the basic Marxist category of production since the producers (of brand names, etc.) determine consumer choices. In education, for example, *summa cum laudes* given out by producers (universities) confer status on consumer goods (students). Goods stamped as 'A' have higher use- and sign-value. Both use and sign value of these 'Gucci stamped' degrees diminishes in direct proportion to their proliferation. Gain (1993) also argued that Baudrillard did not entirely move away from Marx's notion that production determines consumption.

who sought to gain increased social status burned all of his possessions to show how indifferent he was to 'things.' The ritual act illustrated a total victory of sign-value over 'thing-value.'[2] Baudrillard's (1998) most vivid illustration of the modern triumph of sign-value is 'the magnificent dress that the star wears for just one evening' (p. 46).

In *The Consumer Society,* Baudrillard (1998) called into question the institutionalized sign system of signification, what Stewart (1995) characterized as the Cartesian 'two-world ontology' in which there is a foundational distinction between the world of physical representations and what they represent (p. 178). For Descartes, the 'two worlds' were the world of things, *res extensa,* and the world of thought, *res cogitans*. The world of thought takes precedence because the world of things is subject to doubt whereas the existence of the world of thought is, like avowals, certain in the mind of the individual. Baudrillard followed in the Cartesian tradition in granting primacy to the thought value of the thing over the thing itself, but he shifted the perspective to the world of *things* and *signs,* where signs represent the perceived social value, or meaning, of things. He proposed that, in a consumer society, what something means, its sign, takes precedence over its physical existence.

Baudrillard laid the foundation for his analysis of consumerism squarely on the welfare state and its rise in advanced capitalist societies. Consumerism, he argued in *The Consumer Society,* was made possible by the growth of entitlements and the emergence of the modern welfare state, proposing that its goal is to create a condition of 'social equilibrium' in which entitlements and consumerism are balanced, achieved through higher levels of public assistance and 'by increasing the volume of goods' (p. 50).

Although political rhetoric maintains that entitlements, or public assistance, reduces poverty, economists have known at least since the 19th century that wealth redistribution through public assistance programs (e.g., England's New Poor Law of 1834) increases, rather than reduces, the number of people living at the subsistence level (Clark, 2007; Ricardo, 1821). The taxation required to pay for entitlements is one factor. Another is that, historically, even small increases in household income have resulted in higher birth rates, thus expanding the population and lowering overall material prosperity and living standards.

Baudrillard concluded, therefore, that the true political motivation for increasing public assistance is that it increases consumerism. With more money to spend, those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum increase the demand for goods and services, enabling politicians and the media to tout that advanced capitalism is reducing, if not eliminating, inequalities, for even those at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale are able to own TVs and mobile phones like those in the middle and upper classes. Baudrillard recognized that the taxation required to provide public assistance unavoidably pushes members of the middle class, who carry the highest tax burden, downward into the poverty class (see Pew Research Center, 2012) and decreases their consumption ability. He nevertheless saw this as a necessary condition for creating what he called the illusion of 'social equilibrium.' Thus, entitlement programs and increased consumerism only *simulate* equality and democracy because 'growth itself . . . is a function of inequality' (p. 53).

The link between growth and inequality is manifold, involving maximization of profit, income level, taxation, birth rates, and production. When profits increase, for example, the financially advantaged can pay a higher price for goods and services and hence the price of those goods and services rise, placing them further and further out of reach of the financially disadvantaged (Allinson, 2004). To maintain a high level of consumerism in such conditions, production must increase the amount of affordable, poorly made goods to maximize inventory turnover, which further increases profit and raises the price of goods and services. On this account, Baudrillard (1998) concluded that it is 'the need of the inegalitarian social order—the social structure of privilege—to maintain itself that produces and reproduces growth as its strategic element' (p. 53), with inequality being the result.

The consumerism that characterizes advanced capitalism becomes relevant to education when we

[2] Although Baudrillard mentioned the potlatch ceremony in *The Consumer Society* (p. 43), he did not discuss how it represents the triumph of sign over object. He also did not mention the source from which he learned of the Kwakiutl Indians and their customs.

consider one of the frequently discussed topics in education circles today - commodification. Commodification involves more than the focus on treating education, especially higher education, as a business. It also involves increasing the size, if not the number, of schools as well as increasing the number of students having access to schools, given that capitalism is predicated on the growth of commodities and population.

Influenced by politicians and the media, there is a tendency among the populace to ignore the unsustainability of perpetual growth and to view the commodification of education positively as democratization leading to more social equality, given that education has historically been a socioeconomic leveler. We also find in this view the tendency to classify students as consumers and education itself as the 'good' that is consumed.

Baudrillard would consider these perceptions to be off the mark, not only because many factors mask the true nature of education and the status of students but also because, as he reminded us, 'equality' today is not based on equality of intellect, musical ability, or political power but on equal access to goods. Faced with the impossibility of bringing about actual equality, 'a real equality of capacities, of irresponsibilities, of social chances and of happiness,' we are left with 'the democracy of social standing, the democracy of the TV, the car and the stereo' (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 50).

We therefore begin our analysis with a position that many educators will find shocking, which is that Baudrillard's work, especially *Simulacra and Simulation,* maintains that there is no education. Although this view may seem radical, his reasoning is clear. 'Education' has multiple meanings, but from the Baudrillardian perspective the term describes a system of practices that includes not only teaching and learning but also (and at a minimum) funding, research, public policy, and the media's characterization of and influence on that system, as in yearly media reports of the 'best universities.'[3] When all of these factors are taken into account, the result is merely a simulation of education that masks the inequalities inherent in advanced capitalism. Understanding the nature of the simulation is difficult for stakeholders because they are participants – actors, if you will – in the *mise-en-scène*.

Just as everyone in advanced capitalist societies is entitled to a TV, a mobile phone, etc., and just as the demand for equal access to commodities and the proliferation of goods have led to the loss of their use-value, so too has simulated education lost its use-value. Baudrillard recognized that sign-value increases in priority over use-value when the supply of goods becomes more available to a greater and greater percentage of the population and when anonymity becomes the social norm in an ever-expanding population. Thus, when essentially everyone can own a TV, the primary question is, *What kind of TV does one own?* When essentially everyone can own a car, the question is, *What kind of car does one own?*

Baudrillard's (1998, p. 50) concept of the 'democracy of social standing' entails that the value of an 80-inch Sony flat-screen TV is that it signifies higher social standing than the 50-inch Visio flat screen. The value of the BMW 750 is that it signifies a higher social standing than the Toyota Corolla. For Baudrillard, the 'constraint of relativity' (p. 61) inherent in sign-value has led to an opu-lux culture based on branding.[4] Stated another way, Baudrillard saw consumerism in advanced capitalist societies as being driven to a significant degree by the search for social differentiation, if not social distinction, which is a fundamental requirement for happiness.

[3] The criteria used to determine the 'best' universities requires examination. For example, high retention rates are regarded as a crucial criterion of excellence, even though it could well signify that the university is not failing students who should not be allowed to matriculate, much less graduate. More salient factors such as faculty publications, percentage of students accepted from the number of applications, SAT test scores, size of libraries, etc., may be given less weight, or they may not even be taken into account, rendering suspect media statements regarding the 'best' universities.

[4] As exemplified by the Louis Vuitton handbag. Plastic-coated canvas with an estimated production cost of $200 (most of the cost attributable to France's high labor costs), the company's popular 'Delightful' handbag at the time of this writing sells for around $1,500. The utility of the 'Delightful' is exactly the same as the similar-sized 'Delaney Small Classic' sold at Macy's for about $90, but they have vastly different sign-values. That the use-value is the same is illustrated by the frequently told story that when one of the designers visited the factory making a brand-name hand bag in China, he could not distinguish his brand-name bag from a pirated copy. This is not surprising, as they were manufactured in the same factory.

He identified the United States as the apotheosis of consumerism, so we cannot be surprised that here every young person is expected to go to college or university as a social requirement for happiness. Education's sign-value, therefore, is high, but it has only marginal use-value as well as a diminishing exchange-value. Consider that according to a Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy report (2013), only 35% of jobs in the US will require a bachelor's degree by 2020. Also, a recent Pew Research Center study (Desliver, 2014), reported that 44% of recent college graduates in the US work at jobs that are unrelated to their area of study. Sign-value dominates.

As in the case of the mobile phone, sign-value drives demand reflexively, increasing the level of consumerism, which in turn affects the sign-value. What was once a privilege limited to the wealthy (owning a mobile phone) became an entitlement, with the US government, for example, offering 'Lifeline phone service,' which provides free mobile phones to persons on public assistance. Education also was once largely limited to families of means, but today it has most of the characteristics of an entitlement - subsidized, like free mobile phones, through government funding. Perhaps the best-known funding efforts targeting higher education are the GI Bill of 1944; the Middle Income Student Assistant Act of 1978, Pell Grants, and President Obama's call for tuition-free community college education, but these are just four among a plethora of assistance programs. Moreover, these higher-education funding programs pale when compared to the level of federal funding for public education, elementary through high school, which is the highest in the world but nevertheless produces, at best, middling outcomes, as various studies have reported (e.g., The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA).

Just as sales of mobile phones surged on the basis of their entitlement status, college attendance has likewise surged. In 1960, 45.1% of high school graduates enrolled in college after receiving their diploma; by 1970, the number had increased to 51.7%; by 2013, it had increased to 65.9% (*Digest of Educational Statistics,* 2013a). Getting a college degree is a bit more complex than purchasing a mobile phone owing to higher cost and admission criteria, but these criteria increasingly are becoming vestiges of higher education's former status as a privilege. Consider that Harvard's basic admission requirements in the late 19th century involved testing applicants on their working knowledge of four languages, Latin, Greek, French, and German. The examination included knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman history and geography as well as the history and geography of modern England and America. Applicants also were tested on their familiarity with English classical literature and their ability to write clearly and intelligently about the books they had read. Finally, they had to demonstrate proficiency in elementary algebra and plane geometry, an acquaintance with the laws and phenomena of physics, or a knowledge of descriptive physics and elementary astronomy. Students who wanted admission to the university's advanced programs were required to pass more rigorous exams (Greenough, 1892).

The emphasis on privilege began to change in the 1920s, when President Charles W. Eliot and his successor, A. Lawrence Lowell, dropped the Latin and Greek requirements. Other schools followed suit. During that decade, the SAT exam was developed and eventually adopted by most colleges to assess applicants. But starting in the 1960s, various groups began challenging the SAT as being *unfair* and *undemocratic* because it served as a barrier to admissions growth as well as a barrier to the entitlement of a college education.

In response, over the last several decades, the exam has been modified several times to make it easier, as in 1992, when the SAT was re-normed and students who took the exam received an extra 150 points. The small percentage of test-takers with a perfect score ended up with higher scores than the test actually allowed. When several decades of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that a majority of matriculating students were testing remedial in writing, a writing section was added to the SAT in 2006 with the aim, ostensibly, of motivating public schools to do a better job of teaching high school students how to write. Unfortunately, public schools seemed to ignore the message, and scores on the writing section of the SAT dropped every year, escalating claims that the test was unfair (Williams, 2014). Educational Testing Service (ETS) therefore decided that, starting in 2016, the writing section would be 'optional'—and therefore of no value with respect to assessing students' college preparedness or to motivating better instruction in public schools. Indeed, the entire history of SAT modifications shows

that they failed to improve students' scores, and today we find that many colleges and universities across the United States have dropped the test from the admission process. The rationale in each case has been characterized as an effort to further democratize higher education and increase enrollments, especially among historically underrepresented groups, thereby increasing social equality. Whether that goal as been achieved remains an open question, but there is no doubt that student populations have increased. But at what cost?

The social goal in a consumer society is to find ways to compensate for inequality with regard to 'capacities' by creating a system in which, if failure is not an option, failure is difficult to achieve. In this context, we may want to reflect on Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe's (1996) analyses of American textbooks, which found that the average literature text for 12th-grade English classes was simpler than 'the average 7th or 8th grade reader published before World War II' (p. 499). They also found that there were no differences in terms of difficulty between Advanced Placement English texts and those used in the lowest-level English classes. Nevertheless, a recent ACT report on retention and degree rates showed that, nationwide, the 4-year degree completion rate for colleges offering bachelor and master degrees was 21.6%. At schools that also offered doctoral degrees, it was 20.9%. The 6-year rate was, respectively, 43.3% and 45.3% (ACT, 2012).

In this light, efforts to address educational disparities appear to have been unable to compensate for systemic inequalities. Baudrillard (1998) observed that the litany in advanced capitalism is 'that all will be given to . . . [consumers] and that they have a legitimate, inalienable right to plenty' (p. 32). With regard to education, we find that in the US, circa 1940, only 22% of males and 28% of females completed high school. That figure rose every decade thereafter. By 1991, not only had males caught up with females, but the overall high school completion rate jumped to a remarkable 80% (Snyder, 1993). By 2013, the number had increased to 90% (*Digest of Educational Statistics,* 2013b). Undergraduate enrollment also increased, from approximately 7.4 million in 1970 to more than 17.7 million in 2013 (US Department of Education, 2015).

Declining SAT and ACT scores make it difficult to conclude from these data that students became smarter over the years. They appear to be the result of two factors: the growing perception of college as a requirement for social happiness, and efforts to game the system by dumbing down texts and curricula, diminishing the meaning of grades through grade inflation (see Williams, 2014). Indeed, if 'growth itself . . . is a function of inequality' (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 53), the increases in undergraduate admissions have not served to increase equality, but just the opposite. Equal access to goods necessarily involves lowering the quality of those goods while simultaneously stimulating opu-lux branding.

As more students enroll at university, two related results seem inevitable. First, the sign-value as well as the exchange-value of an undergraduate degree will continue to drop until they are 'annihilated' (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 7) for all but the schools whose branding has placed them in the top tier. Second, more students will fail and drop out—until the decline in academic standards reaches a level similar to what exists in many school districts where failure is no longer an option.

Levine and Dean (2012) reported that decreasing academic standards and the corollary of grade inflation in higher education are, in no small part, due to the advent of official student evaluation systems, use of which in tenure and promotion decisions too readily leads faculty into pandering and self-censorship when it comes to assigning grades. Arum and Roksa (2011) noted in this regard that 'college teachers ask themselves, 'What grade will ensure no complaint from the student, or worse, a quasi-legal battle over whether the instructions for an assignment were clear enough?' So the number of A-range grades keeps going up, and the motivation for students to excel keeps going down' (p. 7). Here we begin to see one of the costs of commodification, grade inflation and less-educated students, both of which serve to maintain the simulacrum of education. Arguably, inflated grades do not reflect a true assessment of performance—they do not appear to have any real meaning. Indeed, grade-point averages (GPAs) may have reached the status of being purely sign-values that are misidentified as standing for real values. As Baudrillard noted, simulation begins with the implosion of meaning, until it 'envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6).

These outcomes seem to contradict the basic principles of commodification. If we take education to be the commodity and students the consumers, neither outcome is viable, for high failure and dropout rates defeat democratization efforts, and they are incongruent with commercial enterprise. In addition, they fail to produce social equilibrium and appear to confirm Baudrillard's assertion that the growth of consumerism resulting from democratization is a function of inequality. The apparent contradiction is resolved, however, if we consider that our notions about education have included a fundamental error: we mistakenly classify students as consumers and classify education as the commodity. A Baudrillardian perspective would identify students as the commodity, or *goods,* and education as a simulation of the real that does not produce anything other than the illusion of an education. On this account, the principle of social equilibrium, achieved 'by increasing the volume of goods' (p. 50) or inventory, can be understood not only as a response to the inequality among students but also as a means of increasing *inventory turnover,* which perpetuates the simulation and increases higher education's bottom line.

Commodification will continue. Sign-value will continue to dominate. Social inequality will expand. The inevitable decline will be more and more difficult to recognize owing to the increasing meaninglessness of sign differentiation through the multiplication of sign instantiation. How does one adjudicate the prestige value of brand signs - Oxford, Cal Tech, Stanford, Harvard - if an elevated consumerism increases branding efforts to a point where sign differentiation is no longer possible? From a Baudrillardian perspective, there is an inverse relationship between the growth of sign-value members and the prestige value of their signs.

Baudrillard argued that our entire society has become a simulacrum and that the distinction between use-value and sign-value - vaporous for decades - has evaporated. We have for some time now seen evidence in America as everything from textbooks and journalism has undergone a near universal dumbing down. In higher education, academicians have been devalued to such a degree that on most college campuses 50% or more of the faculty have adjunct status. Populism rules, and we find that students rarely address faculty as 'Doctor,' for doing so would be incongruent with consumerism's goal of social leveling. As a reflection of the broader simulated society, higher education administrators are agents in the leveling process but nevertheless exempt from it. Intent on maintaining a high level of consumerism, they facilitate high dropout rates and the production of poorly made goods to maximize inventory turnover.

Worth noting is that when administrators allow grade inflation so as to manipulate dropout rates, they permit poorly made goods (poorly educated students) to be 'produced' willy-nilly. Ironically, the proliferation of *magna* and *summa cum laudes* lessens the 'brand name' value of these degrees as they become more common. Their exchange-value diminishes, along with their use-value, and the true value of education retreats. The end result, in either case, is what Baudrillard described, education as a simulacrum.

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